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University of Bath

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The continuous growth and development of ‘International Schooling’: The notion of a ‘transitionary phase’

The context

Volume 38 of *Compare* included my paper (Bunnell, 2008) addressing the changing landscape of ‘International Schooling’. There, I had argued the case for identifying and predicting a ‘second phase’ of growth and development appearing, after a slow, gradual growth pattern evident since at least the 1960s. A decade later, it seems time to re-visit the situation, and discuss the emergent nature of this shifting scene especially as it was at that time, ‘relatively early in its development’ (Bunnell, 2008 p.416). In particular, the arena is now ripe for sociological inquiry (Resnik, 2012; Tarc and Mishra Tarc, 2015), and we can now add a sociological lens to my notion of there being two ‘phases’ of growth and development.

The sudden and continuous growth of ‘International Schooling’

There now exists a plethora of data about the emergent ‘market’, and my notion of a substantially altering scene since 2008 has been developed (Bunnell, 2014) and reinforced (Bunnell, 2019). The nucleus of this data emanates from the Oxfordshire-based organisation *ISC Research* that has been formally tracking and mapping the growth of ‘International Schools’ for 25 years. Using a very broad and inclusive definition that largely identifies schools delivering a curriculum in English outside an English-speaking country, the *ISC Research* website was reporting in October 2019 (at iscresearch.com), that the ‘market’ now encompassed 11,320 schools educating 5.7 million children, bringing in a fee-income of USD51.8 bn, and involving 560,000 staff. By contrast, I had reported a decade ago (Bunnell, 2008 p.416) that the same ‘market’ in January 2007 involved 4,563 schools serving just over two million children. One can immediately see that the ‘market’ has more than doubled in size between 2007 and 2019.

The ‘market’ is set for much further growth (Gaskell, 2016) and this adds to the need to more critically address the trends. *ISC Research* is predicting that by 2028, there will be 16,500 schools educating nearly 10m children. In other words, the next decade is expected to witness enormous, continuous growth in terms of schools, students, teachers, and fee income. Undeniably, ‘International Schooling’ has become a big business, and is no longer a peripheral, minor area of education.

The sudden changes in nature of ‘International Schooling’

Alongside the growth, there have been major shifts in the nature and characteristics of the ‘market’. Discussion has already begun in the *Compare* Forum (Poole, 2019a) regarding the changing scene in China, where many ‘International Schools’ deliver a bilingual curriculum. Since it was previously noted that ‘few schools during the ‘first phase’ chose to offer a genuinely bilingual model of international education’ (Bunnell, 2008 p.423), we can begin to see that major shifts have occurred in terms of the characteristics, purpose, and identity of some

institutions within the field. Further comment on this topic is needed, especially from those who have witnessed this change within a local setting, such as mainland China.

A major unexpected and unforeseen growth trend since my 2008 paper has been the re-positioning of 'International Schooling', as the 'market' increasingly attracts a 'local' base of aspiring, middle-class customer/client/consumer rather than the normal globally-mobile 'international community' that had dominated the scene in the 'first phase'. This had been noted in 2008, but it was at that time a relatively new phenomenon. I had said (Bunnell, 2008 p.417) that 'the idea of international schools serving a single distinct type of consumer is undermined by a relatively new form of parent in countries such as Thailand and India.' Since then, the much more sophisticated notion that the 'market' involves an emergent, locally-based 'Global Middle Class' (GMC) has been introduced (Ball and Nikita, 2014) and although the discussion has advanced considerably over the past few years (e.g. Tarc, Mishra Tarc, and Wu, 2019) it is still in its infancy in terms of whether this represents a new 'global class' as such (Ball, 2010), with common aspirations and views.

Second, a definite 'Global Education Industry' (GEI) now exists generally and is increasingly serving the private 'International Schooling market', involving a plethora of complex networked actors, backed by global private equity and sovereign wealth funds (Verger, Steiner-Khamsi and Lubienski, 2017). I had said that there was emerging 'a discrete industry' (Bunnell, 2008 p.415), but this now seem a gross under-estimate of what was to come. The ethics of the market place are now well entrenched, within an area of education that was previously ethically prone towards non-profit making activity. Alongside this, the 'market' has been opened-up in some places by local, national policy-making some of which is arguably under-discussed and often emerging by stealth (Kim and Mobernd, 2019). The autonomous, non-political arena of 'International Schooling' is hence now firmly placed within a politically driven lens of activity, prone to whims and fads.

Thus, a perfect set of supply (profit-driven, liberalisation) and demand (market-driven, globalisation) forces are now in place, driving growth (Machin, 2017), especially in areas of the world such as India, China and South East Asia (Wettewa, 2016). This re-positioning of 'International Schooling' as a powerful model of educational reform, and local parental choice was not foreseen in 2008.

The scope for a fresh analysis

My view now is that the period until 2008 was one of 'mechanical solidarity'. French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his 1895 book, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, developed this concept. He advanced it further in his 1987 book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, thus forming a 'Theory of Industrial Society' (Giddens, 1978). Here, he argued that suicide mainly results from a lack of integration of the individual into society, especially one that has changed suddenly and without warning. Moreover, it can happen where society has shifted from a relatively 'simple' one where relationships and bonds are strong. Durkheim termed this 'simple' form of society 'mechanical solidarity', characterised by loyal, family-style bonds. Here, the role of individuals is clear and relatively homogenous. In other words, there is a low level of division of labour, and each person has a strong sense of identity, belonging, and purpose.

Pope and Johnson (1983, p.682) describe ‘mechanical solidarity’ as a condition which ‘prevails in primitive society, where likenesses are extensive and the collective conscience is powerful.’ This arguably epitomised the ‘first phase’, which has been discussed recently in this Compare Forum in the context of representing the ‘ideal epoch’ (Poole, 2019a), which was characterised by a strong sense of network and mutual-belief. There existed a common pedagogical and philosophical bond through authorisation of the irenic-driven programmes of the Geneva-registered International Baccalaureate (IB). I had said (Bunnell, 2008 p.417) that ‘the IB remains at present a near-monopoly mode of curriculum and study.’ This is no longer true. There was a sense of identity, and autonomy, whilst also belonging to a distinct ‘international community’ via membership of ‘regional networks’ and inspection by common accreditation agencies. I had noted (Bunnell, 2008 p.417) that ‘most international schools belong to a regional association.’ This is also no longer true, and shows how the division of labour has become more complex. A bond between schools previously existed, and the field of ‘International Schooling’ seemed tribal and insular. It also seemed rather ad hoc, amateurish and disordered.

Previously, the operation and growth of individual schools had relied largely upon parental and educator co-operation, and volunteering. In this context, the field previously was quite archaic, and quaint. The field of ‘International Schooling’ is now strongly identified with commerce, and profit-driven private equity funding, often within groupings of branded schools, revealing a much more complex division of labour and a higher level of inter-dependence.

The shift away from this initial stage of ‘mechanical solidarity’ was being noticed a decade ago when I had asserted (Bunnell, 2008 p.417) that:

‘Following the rather chaotic ‘first phase’, this dimension of education is now beginning informally to set itself a challenging and important set of goals.’

Moreover, I had said (Bunnell, 2008 p.419) that:

‘There are visible signs emerging that international education is now moving towards becoming a more ordered, structured and outwardly professional worldwide system.’

Put another way, I now can see that the field in 2008 was moving towards a society resembling ‘organic solidarity’. There had always existed a ‘supply-chain’ yet now it seems to be becoming more complex, and sophisticated. In other words, there has emerged a much greater sense of a global division of labour, where ‘International Schools’ are, for instance, now more closely aligned with Higher Education Institutions. Evidence now exists (Keeling, 2015) that they substantially ‘feed-in’ to certain universities (e.g. the University of British Columbia), where school-graduates are clustering. Here is a further example of a potential GMC emerging. At another level, companies within the GEI such as Pearson and Oxford University Press are now much more closely associated with supplying resources.

The notion of a ‘transitory phase’

In retrospect, my notion of a ‘clean-break’ between the two phases was overly simplistic. A ‘transitory phase’ should now be added to the scene, as predicted by Durkheim’s ‘Theory of Industrial Society’. The sudden and unexpected shift from a ‘traditional’ mode of society based upon ‘mechanical solidarity’ towards an advanced ‘industrial’ one based upon ‘organic

solidarity', will inevitably involve an uneasy 'transitional phase', as the previous norms and values break-down and the actors must adjust to emerging, different, and problematic norms and values.

This can be expected to create a condition of 'anomie' or 'normlessness'. Such a sense of unease can be detected, and a condition of 'precarity' is now firmly acknowledged (Poole, 2019) as the norms and values of the commercially/profit driven (GEI) and locally/politically led (GMC) 'second phase' continue to evolve and be embedded. Discussion has already begun (Hayden and Thompson, 2018) about the ethics of the new scene since the mission of many schools still insist on idealistic intentions and outcomes, which are seemingly being compromised by the ownership and funding of the schools. Yet, growth continues unabated, and a sense of 'resilience' is now being recognised, and being theorised (Poole, 2019b).

This 'transitional phase', exciting yet unpredictable, will no doubt prove to be an unsettling and disturbing one for many actors. At one level, this will provide evidence of how sustainable the growth really is. At another level, it provides a rich arena for sociological study, and I would welcome further input into this.

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